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## **Public financing leads to public accountability [Commentary]**

### **Montgomery County is preparing to establish the state's first public financing system for local offices**

By Phil Andrews

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For many years, special interests — particularly the development industry — have played an inordinate role in financing the campaigns of county executive and county council candidates throughout Maryland. Once elected, these officials often negotiate or vote on matters of concern to those who financially supported them, such as land use and zoning issues. Political Action Committees representing unions that negotiate contracts with county executives (that require approval by county councils) have often written \$6,000 checks to candidates.

Enough already!

In the United States, government isn't supposed to be of, by and for special interests. It's time for real reform that puts the people first. Last year, the Maryland General Assembly — prodded by Common Cause Maryland — approved a provision that enables counties to establish a voluntary public financing system for county offices beginning with the 2018 elections.

The Montgomery County Council is moving toward establishing Maryland's (and the Baltimore-Washington region's) first public financing system for county council and county executive races. The plan would be the first of its kind in the nation with the particular parameters proposed. The system Montgomery is considering could be used as a model for other counties around the state to adopt.

Public financing would increase competition by enabling candidates without access to big money to run viable campaigns for county office. It would enable candidates to spend more time engaging voters rather than dialing for dollars, which would help increase voter participation. It would make county government more responsive to the public, and it would improve public confidence in those governments.

Participation by candidates in Montgomery's public financing system would be voluntary and would require raising a threshold amount to demonstrate voter support before limited matching funds would be made available. Contributions would be limited to individuals giving \$150 or less, though there would be no cap on total amounts raised. The bill (MC 16-14) would require participating candidates to forego any PAC, corporate, labor or group contributions.

The Montgomery bill requires a candidate running for a district seat on the County Council who seeks public matching funds to qualify by raising \$10,000 from at least 125 registered county voters contributing no more than \$150 each. Candidates running for at-large seats on the County Council would have to raise at least \$20,000 in contributions from at least 250 registered county voters giving \$150 or less. Candidates running for county executive would have to raise at least \$40,000 in contributions from at least 500 registered county voters giving \$150 or less.

A unique aspect of the proposed system is that the first \$50 given to a candidate for Montgomery County Council from a registered county voter would generate a 4 to1 public funding match (\$200); the second donation of \$50 from the same donor would generate a 3 to1 funding match (\$150); and the third donation of \$50 would generate a 2 to1 funding match (\$100). In executive races, the first \$50 given by a donor would be matched at 6 to 1, the second at 4 to1 and the third at 2 to1.

This funding match would give candidates strong incentives to solicit small, individual contributions and would encourage more people to contribute. A small portion of the natural growth in general tax revenues would fund the system, which in Montgomery would cost approximately \$2 million annually, depending on the number of candidates who participate — a fraction of Montgomery's annual aggregate budget of nearly \$5 billion. In other jurisdictions, where campaign spending is considerably less, the cost to fund the programs would be proportionally less.

All nine members of the Montgomery County Council are sponsoring this bill, and Common Cause Maryland, the Sierra Club, Progressive Maryland, the ACLU, the Young Democrats of Montgomery County and Progressive Neighbors have endorsed it.

The Montgomery public financing plan is something that all jurisdictions in Maryland should consider adopting. For a government to represent its people, they — rather than special interests — must have the crucial role in funding the campaigns of those who would represent them.

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